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SUBJECT: THAILAND: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON NEW DEMOCRAT PARTY  
LEADER APHISIT

REF: BANGKOK 1933

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On March 21 the Ambassador met with newly installed Democrat Party (DP) leader Aphisit Wetchachiwa. Aphisit spoke candidly about mistakes made by the DP during the election and discussed how he hoped to form the party into an effective opposition to Prime Minister Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party. Acknowledging the seriousness of the situation in southern Thailand, Aphisit said the creation of a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) offered the Thaksin administration a rare opportunity to change its current failing policy; but the DP was not convinced Thaksin would turn from populist calls for a continued hard-line approach. Aphisit said Free Trade Agreements would continue to be the government's highest external priority. Aphisit is young, smart, telegenic, articulate, and ambitious and could develop into a serious future challenger for Thaksin. END SUMMARY

AFTER THE ELECTION DISASTER, A NEW DEMOCRAT LEADER

12. (U) On March 21 the Ambassador met with newly installed Democrat Party (DP) leader Aphisit Wetchachiwa at the party's headquarters. Aphisit assumed leadership of the DP after Banyat Bantadtan stepped down (along with the entire DP Executive Board) on February 8, 2005 following the party's staggering defeat in the general election. The DP's 96 seats in Parliament leave them unable to raise censure motions against Prime Minister Thaksin's ministers.

13. (U) The DP, with more than 3.8 million registered members, is Thailand's oldest active political party and has deep roots in modern Thai democratic history (reftel). However, the party has struggled with its current role as the opposition party and has developed few successful approaches to confront Thaksin and the TRT. During the election, the DP was unable to pose a strong alternative to Thaksin, offering policies that mimicked the TRT's while virtually conceding defeat more than a year in advance.

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE DEMOCRATS IN THE ELECTION?

14. (SBU) Discussing the recent election, Aphisit admitted the DP never offered a credible alternative to Thaksin and Thai Rak Thai (TRT). He said the DP had "no clear message," and didn't offer policy ideas clearly different from Thaksin's populist measures. Aphisit said the DP would not be an effective opposition party until they convinced the public that they could effectively govern the country. He promised that the DP would start offering alternatives to Thaksin and TRT, instead of just criticizing from the sidelines.

15. (SBU) Aphisit has indicated publicly that he is serious about restructuring the DP to be more pro-active and capable of dealing with the new style of politics that Thaksin has introduced. He has also set a target of attracting at least 14 million votes in the 2009 general election; almost double the votes the party received in February of this year. Aphisit told the Ambassador that the DP would learn from Thaksin and TRT's sophisticated campaign methods.

BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION

16. (SBU) Aphisit agreed that Thai politics is evolving into a two party system. However, the DP has a long way to go before it is a credible alternative to Thaksin's TRT. Aphisit said that the DP's goal was to establish a "shadow" cabinet within two years, and within four years to have developed enough credibility with the public to be viewed as a real alternative to TRT.

WILLING TO WORK WITH THAKSIN ON THE SOUTH

17. (SBU) The Democrats won decisively in southern Thailand, winning 52 of the region's 54 seats. They did especially well in the three troubled provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, winning 10 of 11 seats -- including six held by TRT incumbents. The DP's strong regional victory seems to indicate a popular backlash to the Government's heavy-handed

security policy. Following the election, Aphisit has traveled to the region, and has publicly discussed alternatives to Thaksin's policies.

18. (SBU) Aphisit told the Ambassador the situation in Thailand's far south is a "national problem," and that he is willing to work with the Thaksin administration. He said there had been some hopeful recent developments in the South, leading to a more conciliatory atmosphere. Aphisit said as members of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) are publicly announced -- and as new policies were presented -- the DP would offer suggestions and would not be overly critical.

19. (SBU) Aphisit opined that the creation of the NRC gave the government a small window of opportunity to change its approach to the problems of southern Thailand. Aphisit said Anand Panyarachun, the universally respected former Prime Minister and designated Chairman of the NRC, will give the government good advice, and would not be unduly influenced or bullied by Thaksin. Aphisit is worried, however, that Thaksin will "respond" to public opinion -- which clamors for a hard-line approach -- and end up ignoring the NRC's findings.

110. (SBU) Aphisit blames Thaksin for the deteriorating situation in the south and the widening gap between the Buddhist and Muslim communities. He cited Thaksin's decision to dissolve the combined civilian, military and police command (CMP-43), which had been successful in building trust among the local populace and coordinating security forces, and his insensitive statements about Muslims. He said Thaksin's hard-line approach plays right into separatist hands by further alienating the population.

#### U.S./THAI RELATIONS - FOCUS ON THE FTA

111. (SBU) Turning toward the state of U.S./Thai relations, Aphisit noted that much of the public's perceptions of the U.S. would be influenced by developments in Iraq. He said the government, however, is focused on the FTA. Aphisit believes that Thaksin wants Thailand to become the first country to have an FTA with China, India, Japan, and the U.S. He said that the FTA will be the focus of our bilateral relationship, and is correspondingly at the top of the DP's agenda.

#### COMMENT

112. (SBU) Aphisit is very articulate and speaks in a crisp English accent. He has made for TV good looks, and appears even younger than his 40 years. With his appearance, intellect, and experience, Aphisit could evolve into a formidable political presence. However, he has yet to demonstrate a forceful personality needed to counter Thaksin's. Aphisit also has a huge challenge in crafting the often fractious Democrats into a real opposition party, with national reach, that can stand up to Thai Rak Thai and recapture Government House. END COMMENT

#### BIOGRAPHIC NOTE

113. (U) Aphisit was born on August 3, 1964, in Bangkok. His father, Dr. Atthasit Wetchachiwa, was Deputy Public Health Minister in the Anand Panyarachun Administration. He completed junior and senior high school at Eaton College, England. Aphisit continued his studies in England, receiving a bachelor's degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (with First Class Honors) from Oxford University in 1986. Upon returning to Thailand he taught economics for two years at Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, earning the rank of Army Sub-Lieutenant. During this period he earned a LL.B. from Ramkhamhaeng University. Aphisit then returned to England where he completed a master's degree in Economics at Oxford University, ranking first among 200 graduates.

114. (U) Due to his extraordinary academic record Aphisit was admitted to the Economics Faculty of Thammasat University in 1990 without undergoing the normal written examination. During his two-year teaching stint at Thammasat he was well regarded by both colleagues and students. During a one-year period after the 1991-coup d'etat Aphisit joined the well-known economist and TV commentator Dr. Choemsak Pinthong in running a political-oriented TV program "Mong Tang Mum" or "From Different Angles". Aphisit was an active academic during this period, and publicly stood against the military-dominated regime.

115. (U) Aphisit began his political career in March 1992 when he won a close race over a Phalang Tham Party candidate to become the DP's only Bangkok MP. His decision to enter politics came as no surprise to colleagues familiar with his political ambition. He won successive elections in September 1992, July 1995, and November 1996. In the January 2001 and February 2005 elections, he was elected from the DP Party List.

116. (U) Aphisit was Government Spokesman from 1992-1994, Deputy Secretary to the Prime Minister in 1995, Chairman of the House Standing Committee on Education during 1996-1997, and Minister attached to the PM's Office from 1997-2001 -- his first ministerial assignment. At the DP's general meeting on April 20, 2003, he lost a bitter leadership contest to Banyat Bantadtan after former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai stepped down as DP leader. In that meeting, he was chosen as the first deputy party leader.

117. (U) Following the TRT's landslide victory in the February 2005 general election, the DP General Assembly elected Aphisit as the new Party Leader with veteran southern MP Suthep Thuaksuban as the Party Secretary General.

118. (U) Aphisit is married to Phimphen, the daughter of a political scientist of Chulalongkorn University, Phongphen Sakuntaphai, and a Bank of Thailand Assistant Governor, Praphaiphon. They have 2 young children. END BIOGRAPHIC NOTE  
BOYCE